4. Ethics Without Principles

(1994)

I have been suggesting that we think of pragmatism as an attempt to alter our self-image so as to make it consistent with the Darwinian claim that we differ from other animals simply in the complexity of our behaviour. To adopt this image of ourselves as exceptionally clever animals is to set aside the Greek way of distinguishing ourselves from the brutes. Plato and Aristotle suggested that the other animals lived in a world of sensory appearance, that their lives consisted of adjusting to the changes of these appearances, and that they were thus incapable of *knowing*, for knowledge consists in penetrating behind appearance to reality. Pragmatists, in contrast, treat inquiry – in both physics and ethics – as the search for adjustment, and in particular for that sort of adjustment to our fellow humans which we call 'the search for acceptable justification and eventual agreement'. I have argued that we should substitute this latter search for the traditional descriptions of the quest for truth.

In the previous chapter, I portrayed pragmatism as a generalized form of antiessentialism – as an attempt to break down the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic features of things. By thinking of everything as relational through and through, pragmatists attempt to get rid of the contrast between reality and appearance. Pragmatists hope to make it impossible for the sceptic to raise the question, 'Is our knowledge of things adequate to the way things really are?' They substitute for this traditional question the *practical* question, 'Are our ways of describing things, of relating them to other things so as to make them fulfil our needs more adequately, as good as possible? Or can we do better? Can our future be made better than our present?'

In this chapter I turn to the distinction between morality and

prudence. This distinction is traditionally drawn by opposing unconditional and categorical obligations to conditional and hypothetical ones. Pragmatists have doubts about the suggestion that anything is unconditional, because they doubt that anything is, or could be, nonrelational. So they need to reinterpret the distinctions between morality and prudence, morality and expediency, and morality and self-interest, in ways which dispense with the notion of unconditionality.

Dewey suggested that we reconstruct the distinction between prudence and morality in terms of the distinction between routine and non-routine social relationships. He saw 'prudence' as a member of the same family of concepts as 'habit' and 'custom'. All three words describe familiar and relatively uncontroversial ways in which individuals and groups adjust to the stresses and strains of their non-human and human environments. It is obviously prudent both to keep an eye out for poisonous snakes in the grass and to trust strangers less than members of one's own family. 'Prudence', 'expediency' and 'efficiency' are all terms which describe such routine and uncontroversial adjustments to circumstance.

Morality and law, on the other hand, begin when controversy arises. We invent both when we can no longer just do what comes naturally, when routine is no longer good enough, or when habit and custom no longer suffice. These will no longer suffice when the individual's needs begin to clash with those of her family, or her family's with those of the neighbours', or when economic strain begins to split her community into warring classes, or when that community must come to terms with an alien community. On Dewey's account, the prudence–morality distinction is, like that between custom and law, a distinction of degree – the degree of need for conscious deliberation and explicit formulation of precepts – rather than a distinction of kind. For pragmatists like Dewey, there is no distinction of kind between what is useful and what is right. For, as Dewey said, 'Right is only an abstract name for the multitude of concrete demands in action which others impress upon us, and of which we are obliged, if we would live, to take some account.'[1] The utilitarians were right when they coalesced the moral and the useful, even though they were wrong in thinking that utility

is simply a matter of getting pleasure and avoiding pain. Dewey agrees with Aristotle, against Bentham, that human happiness cannot be reduced to the accumulation of pleasures.

From Kant's point of view, however, Aristotle, Bentham and Dewey are equally blind to the true nature of morality. To identify moral obligation with the need to adjust one's behaviour to the needs of other human beings is, for Kantians, either vicious or simple-minded. Dewey seems to Kantians to have confused duty with self-interest, the intrinsic authority of the moral law with the banausic need to bargain with opponents whom one cannot overcome.

Dewey was well aware of this Kantian criticism. Here is one of the passages in which he attempted to answer it:

> Morals, it is said, imply the subordination of fact to ideal consideration, while the view presented [Dewey's own view] makes morals secondary to bare fact, which is equal to depriving them of dignity and jurisdiction . . . The criticism rests upon a false separation. It argues in effect that either ideal standards antecede customs and confer their moral quality upon them, or that in being subsequent to custom[s] and evolved from them, they are mere accidental by-products. But how does it stand with language? . . . Language grew out of unintelligent babblings, instinctive motions called gestures, and the pressure of circumstance. But nevertheless language once called into existence is language and operates as language.[2]

The point of Dewey's analogy between language and morality is that there was no decisive moment at which language stopped being a series of reactions to the stimuli provided by the behaviour of other humans and started to be an instrument for expressing beliefs. Similarly, there was no point at which practical reasoning stopped being prudential and became specifically moral, no point at which it stopped being merely useful and started being authoritative.

Dewey's reply to those who, like Kant, think of morality as stemming from a specifically human faculty called 'reason', and of prudence as something shared with the brutes, is that the *only* thing that is specifically human is language. But the history of language is a seamless

story of gradually increasing complexity. The story of how we got from Neanderthal grunts and nudges to German philosophical treatises is no more discontinuous than the story of how we got from the amoebae to the anthropoids. The two stories are parts of one larger story. Cultural evolution takes over from biological evolution without a break. From an evolutionary point of view, there is no difference between the grunts and the treatises, save complexity. Yet the difference between language-using and dumb animals, and the difference between cultures which do not engage in conscious, collective moral deliberation and cultures which do, are as important and obvious as ever, even though both are differences of degree. On Dewey's view, philosophers who have sharply distinguished reason from experience, or morality from prudence, have tried to turn an important difference of degree into a difference of metaphysical kind. They have thereby constructed problems for themselves which are as insoluble as they are artificial.

Dewey saw Kant's moral philosophy as taking 'the doctrine that the essence of reason is complete universality (and hence necessity and immutability) with the seriousness becoming the professor of logic'.[3] He interpreted Kant's attempt to get advice about what to do out of the mere idea of universalizability as offering not an impossible disregard of consequences but merely 'a broad impartial view of consequences'. All that the categorical imperative does, Dewey said, is to commend 'the habit of asking how we should be willing to be treated in a similar case'.[4] The attempt to do more, to get 'ready-made rules available at a moment's notice for settling any kind of moral difficulty', seemed to Dewey to have been 'born of timidity and nourished by love of authoritative prestige'. Only such a tendency to sado-masochism, Dewey thought, could have led to the idea that 'absence of immutably fixed and universally applicable ready-made principles is equivalent to moral chaos'.[5]

So much for the standard Deweyan criticism of the Kantian way of viewing the distinction between morality and prudence. I want now to turn to another distinction, that between reason and sentiment, thinking and feeling. Doing so will let me relate Dewey's views to those of Annette Baier. Baier, one of the leading feminist philosophers

of the present day, takes David Hume as her model. She praises Hume as the 'woman's moral philosopher' because of his willingness to take sentiment, and indeed sentimentality, as central to the moral consciousness. She also praises him for 'de-intellectualizing and de-sanctifying the moral endeavor . . . presenting it as the human equivalent of various social controls in animal or insect populations'.[6] Though Baier rarely mentions Dewey, and Dewey rarely discusses Hume's moral philosophy at any length, these three militantly anti-Kantian philosophers are on the same side of most arguments. All three share the same distrust of the notion of 'moral obligation'. Dewey, Baier and Hume can all agree with Nietzsche that the pre-Socratic Greeks were free from the 'timidity', the fear of having to make hard choices, which led Plato to search for immutable moral truth. All three see the temporal circumstances of human life as difficult enough without sado-masochistically adding immutable, unconditional obligations.

Baier has proposed that we substitute the notion of 'appropriate trust' for that of 'obligation' as our central moral concept. She has said that

> there is no room for moral theory as something which is more philosophical and less committed than moral deliberation, and which is not simply an account of our customs and styles of justification, criticism, protest, revolt, conversion, and resolution.[7]

In words that echo some of Dewey's, Baier says that 'the villain is the rationalist, law-fixated tradition in moral philosophy',[8] a tradition which assumes that 'behind every moral intuition lies a universal rule'.[9] That tradition assumes that Hume's attempt to think of moral progress as a progress of sentiments fails to account for moral obligation. But, on Baier's view, as on Dewey's, there is nothing to account for: moral obligation does not have a nature, or a source, different from tradition, habit and custom. Morality is simply a new and controversial custom. Our sense that prudence is unheroic and morality heroic is merely the recognition that testing out the relatively untried is more dangerous, more risky, than doing what comes naturally.

Baier and Dewey agree that the central flaw in much traditional moral philosophy has been the myth of the self as nonrelational, as capable of existing independently of any concern for others, as a cold psychopath needing to be constrained to take account of other people's needs. This is the picture of the self which philosophers since Plato have expressed in terms of the division between 'reason' and 'the passions' – a division which Hume unfortunately perpetuated in his notorious inversion of Plato, his claim that 'reason is, and should be, the slave of the passions'. Ever since Plato, the West has construed the reason–passion distinction as paralleling the distinction between the universal and the individual, as well as that between unselfish and selfish actions. The religious, Platonic and Kantian traditions have thus saddled us with a distinction between the true self and the false self, the self which hears the call of conscience and the self which is merely 'self-interested'. The latter self is merely prudential, and not yet moral.

Baier and Dewey both argue that this notion of the self as cold, self-interested, calculating, psychopath should be set aside. If we really were such selves, the question 'Why should I be moral?' would be forever unanswerable. Only when we masochistically picture ourselves as such selves do we feel the need to punish ourselves by quailing before divine commands, or before Kant's tribunal of pure practical reason. But if we follow the pragmatists' advice to see everything as constituted by its relations to everything else, it is easy to detect the fallacy which Dewey described as 'transforming the (truistic) fact of acting *as* a self into the fiction of acting always *for* self'.[10] We shall commit this fallacy, and continue to think of the self as a psychopath in need of restraint, as long as we accept what Dewey called the 'belief in the fixity and simplicity of the self'. Dewey associated this belief with 'the theologians' . . . dogma of the unity and ready-made completeness of the soul'.[11] But he might equally well have associated it with the argument of Plato's *Phaedo*, or with Kant's doctrine that the moral self is a nonempirical self.

If we put such notions of unity and readymade completeness to one side, we can say, with Dewey, that 'selfhood (except insofar as it has encased itself in a shell of routine) is in process of making, and that

any self is capable of including within itself a number of inconsistent selves, of unharmonized dispositions'.[12] This notion of multiple inconsistent selves is, as Donald Davidson has shown, a good way of naturalizing and demystifying the Freudian notion of the unconscious.[13] But the most important link between Freud and Dewey is the one which Baier emphasizes: the role of the family, and in particular of maternal love, in creating nonpsychopaths, that is, human selves who find concern for others entirely natural. Baier says, in words which Dewey might have written, that 'the secular equivalent of faith in God . . . is faith in the human community and its evolving procedures – in the prospects for many-handed cognitive ambitions and moral hopes'.[14] But she sees that faith as rooted in the faith most of us have in our parents and siblings. The trust which holds a family together is Baier's model for the secular faith which may hold together modern, posttraditional societies.

Freud helped us to see that we get psychopaths – people whose self-conception involves no relations to others – only when parental love, and the trust which such love creates in the child, are absent. To see the point Baier wants us to appreciate, consider the question: Do I have a moral obligation to my mother? My wife? My children? 'Morality' and 'obligation' here seem inapposite. For doing what one is obliged to do contrasts with doing what comes naturally, and for most people responding to the needs of family members is the most natural thing in the world. Such responses come naturally because most of us define ourselves, at least in part, by our relations to members of our family. Our needs and theirs largely overlap; we are not happy if they are not. We would not wish to be well fed while our children go hungry; that would be unnatural. Would it also be immoral? It is a bit strange to say so. One would only employ this term if one encountered a parent who was also a pathological egoist, a mother or father whose sense of self had nothing to do with her or his children – the sort of person envisaged by decision theory, someone whose identity is constituted by 'preference rankings' rather than by fellow feeling.

By contrast, I may feel a specifically *moral* obligation to deprive both my children and myself of a portion of the available food because

there are starving people outside the door. The word 'moral' is appropriate here because the demand is less *natural* than the demand to feed my children. It is less closely connected with my sense of who I am. But the desire to feed the hungry stranger may of course *become* as tightly woven into my self-conception as the desire to feed my family. Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves. The ideal limit of this process of enlargement is the self envisaged by Christian and Buddhist accounts of sainthood – an ideal self to whom the hunger and suffering of *any* human being (and even, perhaps, that of any other animal) is intensely painful.

Should this progress ever be completed, the term 'morality' would drop out of the language. For there would no longer be any way, nor any need, to contrast doing what comes naturally with doing what is moral. We should all have what Kant calls a 'holy will'. The term 'moral obligation' becomes increasingly less appropriate to the degree to which we identify with those whom we help: the degree to which we mention them when telling ourselves stories about who we are, the degree to which their story is also our story.[15] It comes fairly naturally to share what one has with an old friend, or a near neighbour, or a close business associate, who has been left destitute by a sudden disaster. It comes less naturally to share with a casual acquaintance, or a complete stranger, who is in the same unfortunate situation. In a world in which hunger is common, it does not come naturally to take food from one's children's mouth in order to feed a hungry stranger and her children. But if the stranger and her children are on your doorstep, you may well feel obliged to do just that. The terms 'moral' and 'obligation' become even more appropriate when it is a matter of depriving your children of something they want in order to send money to the victims of a famine in a country you have never seen, to people whom you might well find repellent if you ever encountered them, people whom you might not want as friends, might not want your children to marry, people whose *only* claim on your attention is that you have been told that they are hungry. But Christianity has taught the West to look forward to a world in which there are

no such people, a world in which all men and women are brothers and sisters. In such a world, there would never be any occasion to speak of 'obligation'.

When moral philosophers in the Kantian tradition put sentiment on a par with prejudice, and tell us that 'from a strictly moral point of view' there is no difference between one's own hungry child and a randomly selected hungry child on the other side of the world, they are contrasting this so-called 'moral point of view' with a point of view they call 'mere self-interest'. The idea behind this way of speaking is that morality and obligation start where self-interest stops. The problem with this way of speaking, Dewey insisted, is that the boundaries of the self are fuzzy and flexible. So philosophers in this tradition try to obscure this fuzziness by fixing those boundaries. They do so by saying that the self is constituted by a preference ranking – one which divides people up according to whom one would prefer to be fed first, for example. Then they either contrast moral obligation with preference, or else 'subjectivize' feelings of moral obligation by taking them as just further preferences.

There are difficulties with both of these alternatives. If you contrast moral obligation with preference, you have trouble with the question of moral motivation: what sense does it make, after all, to say that a person acts against her own preferences? On the other hand, if you no longer distinguish between morality and self-interest, and say that what we call morality is simply the self-interest of those who have been acculturated in a certain way, then you will be accused of 'emotivism', of having failed to appreciate Kant's distinction between dignity and value. One way leads to the question Plato tried to answer, 'Why should I be moral?' The other way leads to the question, 'Is there any difference between a taste for feeding hungry strangers and a taste for vanilla ice cream?' More generally, one way seems to lead to a dualistic metaphysics to splitting the human self, and possibly the universe as a whole, into higher and lower segments. The other seems to lead to a wholesale abnegation of our aspirations to something 'higher' than mere animality.

Pragmatists are often accused of just such an abnegation. They are lumped with reductionists, behaviourists, sensualists, nihilists and other

dubious characters. I think that the pragmatist's best defence against this sort of charge is to say that she too has a conception of our difference from the animals. However, hers does not involve a sharp difference – a difference between the infinite and the finite – of the sort illustrated by Kant's distinction between dignity and value, between the unconditioned and the conditioned, the nonrelational and the relational. Rather, the pragmatist sees our difference as a much greater degree of flexibility – in particular, a much greater flexibility in the boundaries of selfhood, in the sheer quantity of relationships which can go to constitute a human self. She sees the ideal of human brotherhood and sisterhood not as the imposition of something nonempirical on the empirical, nor of something nonnatural on the natural, but as the culmination of a process of adjustment which is also a process of recreating human beings.

From this point of view, moral progress is not a matter of an increase of rationality – a gradual diminution of the influence of prejudice and superstition, permitting us to see our moral duty more clearly. Nor is it what Dewey called an increase of intelligence, that is, increasing one's skill at inventing courses of action which simultaneously satisfy many conflicting demands. People can be very intelligent, in this sense, without having wide sympathies. It is neither irrational nor unintelligent to draw the limits of one's moral community at a national, or racial, or gender border. But it is undesirable – morally undesirable. So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. Just as the pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearance which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of ever larger groups of people – in particular, the people who carry out ever more acute observations and perform ever more refined experiments – so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people.

Let me pursue this analogy between science and morals a bit further. I said in the first chapter in this section that pragmatists do not think of scientific, or any other inquiry, as aimed at truth, but rather at

better justificatory ability – better to deal with doubts about what we are saying, either by shoring up what we have previously said or by deciding to say something different. The trouble with aiming at truth is that you would not know when you had reached it, even if you had in fact reached it. But you *can* aim at ever more justification, the assuagement of ever more doubt. Analogously, you cannot aim at 'doing what is right', because you will never know whether you have hit the mark. Long after you are dead, better informed and more sophisticated people may judge your action to have been a tragic mistake, just as they may judge your scientific beliefs as intelligible only by reference to an obsolete paradigm. But you *can* aim at ever more sensitivity to pain, and ever greater satisfaction of ever more various needs. Pragmatists think that the idea of something nonhuman luring us human beings on should be replaced with the idea of getting more and more human beings into our community – of taking the needs and interests and views of more and more diverse human beings into account. Justificatory ability is its own reward. There is no need to worry about whether we will also be rewarded with a sort of immaterial medal labelled 'Truth' or 'Moral Goodness'.[16]

The idea of a 'God's eye view' to which science continually approximates is of a piece with the idea of 'the moral law' to which social custom, in periods of moral progress, continually approximates. The ideas of 'discovering the intrinsic nature of physical reality' and of 'clarifying our unconditional moral obligations' are equally distasteful to pragmatists, because both presuppose the existence of something nonrelational, something exempt from the vicissitudes of time and history, something unaffected by changing human interests and needs. Both ideas are to be replaced, pragmatists think, by metaphors of width rather than of height or depth. Scientific progress is a matter of integrating more and more data into a coherent web of belief – data from microscopes and telescopes with data obtained by the naked eye, data forced into the open by experiments with data which have always been lying about. It is not a matter of penetrating appearance until one comes upon reality. Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy. It is not a matter of rising above the sentimental to the rational. Nor is it a matter of appealing from lower, possibly

corrupt, local courts to a higher court which administers an ahistorical, incorruptible, transcultural moral law.

This switch from metaphors of vertical distance to metaphors of horizontal extent ties in with the pragmatists' insistence on replacing traditional distinctions of kind with distinctions in degree of complexity. Pragmatists substitute the idea of a maximally efficient explanation of a maximally wide range of data for that of the theory which cuts reality at the joints. They substitute the idea of a maximally warm, sensitive and sympathetic human being for the Kantian idea of a Good Will. But though maximality cannot be aimed at, you can aim at explaining more data or being concerned about more people. You cannot aim at being at the end of inquiry, in either physics or ethics. That would be like aiming at being at the end of biological evolution – at being not merely the latest heir of all the ages but the creature in which all the ages were destined to culminate. Analogously, you cannot aim at moral perfection, but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account than you did previously.

So far in this chapter I have been suggesting in rather general terms why the pragmatist wants to get rid of the notion of 'unconditional moral obligation'. In the hope of greater concreteness and vividness, I turn now to another example of unconditionality: the notion of unconditional human rights. Such rights are said to form the fixed boundaries of political and moral deliberation. In American jurisprudence, Ronald Dworkin tells us, rights 'trump' every consideration of social expediency and efficiency. In much political discussion, it is taken for granted that the rights which the US courts have interpreted the US Constitution to bestow, and those universal human rights enumerated in the Helsinki Declaration, are beyond discussion. They are the unmoved movers of much of contemporary politics.

From a pragmatist's point of view, the notion of 'inalienable human rights' is no better and no worse a slogan than that of 'obedience to the will of God'. Either slogan, when invoked as an unmoved mover, is simply a way of saying that our spade is turned – that we have exhausted our argumentative resources. Talk of the will of God or of the rights of man, like talk of 'the honour of the family' or of 'the

fatherland in danger' are not suitable targets for philosophical analysis and criticism. It is fruitless to look behind them. None of these notions should be analyzed, for they are all ways of saying, 'Here I stand: I can do no other.' These are not reasons for action so much as announcements that one has thought the issue through and come to a decision.

Philosophers who see morals as resting on metaphysics, press such notions too hard when they ask questions like, 'But *is* there a God?' or, 'Do human beings really *have* these rights?' Such questions presuppose that moral progress is at least in part a matter of increasing moral knowledge, knowledge about something independent of our social practices: something like the will of God or the nature of humanity. This metaphysical suggestion is vulnerable to Nietzschean suggestions that both God and human rights are superstitions – contrivances put forward by the weak to protect themselves against the strong. Whereas metaphysicians reply to Nietzsche by asserting that there is a 'rational basis' for belief in God or in human rights, pragmatists reply by saying that there is nothing wrong with contrivances. The pragmatist can cheerfully agree with Nietzsche that the idea of human brotherhood would only occur to the weak – to the people being shoved around by the brave, strong, happy warriors whom Nietzsche idolizes. But for pragmatists this fact no more counts against the idea of human rights than Socrates' ugliness counts against his account of the nature of love, or Freud's little private neuroses count against *his* account of love, or Newton's theologicoastrological motivations count against his mechanics. Once you drop the distinction between reason and passion, you no longer discriminate against a good idea because of its origins. You classify ideas according to their relative utility rather than by their sources.

Pragmatists think that the quarrel between rationalist metaphysicians and Nietzsche is without interest.[17] They grant to Nietzsche that reference to human rights is merely a convenient way of summarizing certain aspects of *our* real or proposed practices. Analogously, to say that the intrinsic nature of reality consists of atoms and the void is, for a pragmatist, a way of saying that *our* most successful scientific explanations interpret macrostructural change as a result of micro-

structural change. To say that God wills us to welcome the stranger within our gates is to say that hospitality is one of the virtues upon which *our* community most prides itself. To say that respect for human rights demanded our intervention to save the Jews from the Nazis, or the Bosnian Muslims from the Serbs, is to say that a failure to intervene would make *us* uncomfortable with ourselves, in the way in which knowledge that our neighbours are hungry while we have plenty on the table ourselves makes us unable to continue eating. To speak of human rights is to explain our actions by identifying ourselves with a community of like-minded persons – those who find it natural to act in a certain way.

Claims of the sort I have just made – claims which have the form 'To say such-and-such is to say so-and-so' – are often interpreted in terms of the reality–appearance distinction. So, metaphysically inclined thinkers, obsessed by the distinction between knowledge and opinion or between reason and passion, will interpret my claims as 'irrationalist' and 'emotivist'. But pragmatists do not intend these as claims about what is *really* going on – claims that what appeared to be a fact is actually a value, or what appeared to be a cognition is actually an emotion. Rather, these claims are practical recommendations on what to talk about, suggestions about the terms in which controversy on moral questions is best conducted. On the subject of atoms, the pragmatist thinks that we should not debate the issue of whether unobservable microstructure is a reality or just a convenient fiction. On the subject of human rights, the pragmatist thinks that we should not debate whether human rights have been there all the time, even when nobody recognized them, or are just the social construction of a civilization influenced by Christian doctrines of the brotherhood of man.

Of course they are social constructions. So are atoms, and so is everything else. For, as I suggested in chapter 3, to be a social construction is simply to be the intentional object of a certain set of sentences – sentences used in some societies and not in others. All that it takes to be an object is to be talked about in a reasonably coherent way, but not everybody needs to talk in all ways – nor, therefore, about all objects. Once we give up the idea that the point of discourse is to

represent reality accurately, we will have no interest in distinguishing social constructs from other things. We shall confine ourselves to debating the utility of alternative constructs.

To debate the utility of the set of social constructs we call 'human rights' is to debate the question of whether inclusivist societies are better than exclusivist ones. That is to debate the question of whether communities which encourage tolerance of harmless deviance should be preferred to those communities whose social cohesion depends on conformity, on keeping outsiders at a distance and on eliminating people who try to corrupt the youth. The best single mark of our progress toward a fully fledged human rights culture may be the extent to which we stop interfering with our children's marriage plans because of the national origin, religion, race, or wealth of the intended partner, or because the marriage will be homosexual rather than heterosexual.

Those who wish to supply rational, philosophical foundations for a human rights culture say that what human beings have in common outweighs such adventitious factors as race or religion. But they have trouble spelling out what this commonality consists of. It is not enough to say that we all share a common susceptibility to pain, for there is nothing distinctively human about pain. If pain were all that mattered, it would be as important to protect the rabbits from the foxes as to protect the Jews from the Nazis. If one accepts a naturalistic, Darwinian account of human origins, it is not helpful to say that we all have reason in common, for on this account to be rational is simply to be able to use language. But there are many languages, and most of them are exclusionist. The language of human rights is no more or less characteristic of our species than languages which insist on racial or religious purity.[18]

Pragmatists suggest that we simply give up the philosophical search for commonality. They think that moral progress might be accelerated if we focused instead on our ability to make the particular little things that divide us seem unimportant – not by comparing them with the one big thing that unites us but by comparing them with other little things. Pragmatists think of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true and deep. As I remarked earlier, they like to

replace traditional metaphors of depth or height with metaphors of breadth and extent. Convinced that there is no subtle human essence which philosophy might grasp, they do not try to replace superficiality with depth, nor to rise above the particular in order to grasp the universal. Rather, they hope to minimize one difference at a time – the difference between Christians and Muslims in a particular village in Bosnia, the difference between blacks and whites in a particular town in Alabama, the difference between gays and straights in a particular Catholic congregation in Quebec. The hope is to sew such groups together with a thousand little stitches – to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity.

This picture of moral progress makes us resist Kant's suggestion that morality is a matter of reason, and makes us sympathetic to Hume's suggestion that it is a matter of sentiment. If we were limited to these two candidates, we should side with Hume. But we would prefer to reject the choice, and to set aside faculty psychology once and for all. We recommend dropping the distinction between two separately functioning sources of beliefs and desires. Instead of working within the confines of this distinction, which constantly threatens us with the picture of a division between a true and real self and a false and apparent self, we once again resort to the distinction with which I began the first essay in this section: the distinction between the present and the future.

More specifically, we see both intellectual and moral progress not as a matter of getting closer to the True or the Good or the Right, but as an increase in imaginative power. We see imagination as the cutting edge of cultural evolution, the power which – given peace and prosperity – constantly operates so as to make the human future richer than the human past. Imagination is the source both of new scientific pictures of the physical universe and of new conceptions of possible communities. It is what Newton and Christ, Freud and Marx, had in common: the ability to redescribe the familiar in unfamiliar terms.

Such redescription was practised by the early Christians when they explained that the distinction between Jew and Greek was not as important as had been thought. It is being practised by contemporary feminists, whose descriptions of sexual behaviour and marital

arrangements seem as strange to many men (and, for that matter, many women) as St Paul's indifference to traditional Judaic distinctions seemed to the scribes and the pharisees. It is what the Founding Fathers of my country attempted when they asked people to think of themselves not so much as Pennsylvanian Quakers or Catholic Marylanders but as citizens of a tolerant, pluralistic, federal republic. It is being attempted by those passionate advocates of European unity who hope that their grandchildren will think of themselves as European first and French or German second. But an equally good example of such redescription is Democritus' and Lucretius' suggestion that we try thinking of the world as rebounding atoms, and Copernicus' suggestion that we try thinking of the sun as at rest.

I hope that what I have been saying has helped make clear what I meant by urging that we substitute hope for knowledge. The difference between the Greek conception of human nature and the post-Darwinian, Deweyan conception is the difference between closure and openness – between the security of the unchanging and the Whitmanesque and Whiteheadian romance of unpredictable change. This element of romantic hope, this willingness to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride, breaks down the Greek distinction between contemplation and action. Dewey saw that distinction as the great incubus from which intellectual life in the West needed to escape. His pragmatism was, as Hilary Putnam has said, an 'insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view'. I have interpreted this supremacy as the priority of the need to create new ways of being human, and a new heaven and a new earth for these new humans to inhabit, over the desire for stability, security and order.

* * * *

NOTES

1 John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct, The Middle Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), vol. XIV, p. 224.
2 Dewey, pp. 56–7.

3 Dewey, p. 168.
4 Dewey, p. 169.
5 Dewey, p. 164.
6 Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 147.
7 Baier, p. 232.
8 Baier, p. 236.
9 Baier, p. 208.
10 Dewey, p. 95.
11 Dewey, p. 96.
12 Dewey, p. 96.
13 See Donald Davidson, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' in *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, Richard Wollheim and James Hopkins, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Davidson's view of Freud is expanded and developed by Marcia Cavell in her *The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
14 Baier, p. 293.
15 Here I draw upon Daniel Dennett's very enlightening account of the self as a 'center of narrative gravity', in his *Consciousness Explained* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990). I have attempted to develop the antiessentialism of the second chapter in this section in an article on Dennett, in which I suggest that what goes for selves goes for objects in general, and that a pragmatist should think of all objects as centres of descriptive gravity ('Holism, Intentionality, and the Ambition of Transcendence' in my *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
16 As I see it, the notion of a 'universal validity claim', as used by Habermas and Apel, is just the claim to such a medal, and is thus dispensable. Although I entirely agree with Habermas about the desirability of substituting what he calls 'communicative reason' for 'subject-centred reason', I think of his insistence on universality, and his dislike for what he calls 'contextualism' and 'relativism', as leftovers from a period of philosophical thought in which it seemed that an appeal to the universal was the only alternative to immersion in the contingent status quo.
17 This is a point which I emphasize in my 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', included in *Of Human Rights: Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) and reprinted in my *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1998). That paper offers a more extended version of the view of human rights which I am summarizing here.

18 Here again I agree with Habermas about the linguistic character of rationality. But I try to use this doctrine to show that we do not need to think in universalist terms. Habermas's universalism forbids him to adopt the view of human rights I am offering here.

III

Some Applications of Pragmatism